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Choral Verse Speaking

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Archibald MacLeish says, "A poem should not mean, but be!" — and a poem brought to life by a verse speaking choir *is*! Poems were made to be read aloud, and only when orally interpreted do they possess the fullest meaning and convey the fullest measure of the poet's feeling. Choral speaking is not something new, or merely a passing fad. Down through the ages people have read in unison. The antiphonal chorus was common among the Hebrews; the speaking chorus was an essential element in the plays of the Greeks. Later we have the communal poetry of early England, ballads composed by the peasant folk, which they sang or recited together. The bard travelled from town to town composing tales of his travels in verse to tell the people — tales which the people remembered and would retell among themselves at the end of the day. No, choral speaking is not something new; it is as old, perhaps, as poetry itself. However, in recent years it has assumed new significance as "verse speaking," a title aptly bestowed by John Masfield.

My main interest in this paper is verse speaking as a means of poetry appreciation in the classroom. Students frequently have definite aversions to the study of poetry, and, though the teacher may be simply saturated with love and enthusiasm for the poems at hand, she often is unable to move her pupils. Verse speaking, however, seems to have offered itself as a new and fascinating tool, and it is no far-fetched assumption that students like and appreciate poetry more when it is presented in this form. A classroom experiment conducted at the Housatonic Valley Regional High School in Falls Village, Connecticut, attempted to determine as accurately as possible the relative effectiveness in the teaching of poetry appreciation. One procedure employed the verse speak-

ing technique; the other incorporated the best of the traditional classroom methods. The following are the results reported by Grace M. Crofton:

On the basis of the objective data compiled by this experiment, the verse speaking technique cannot be recommended as being of any greater value than any good progressive procedure. The subjective phases which cannot be tested or presented very convincingly lead me to believe that a change in feeling does occur, and that this change is fundamental in the growth of appreciation. A careful comparative study of the statements made in response to the questions, "Has your feeling for poetry changed? If so, how?" reveals a rather striking difference in the quality of reactions made by the verse speaking group. Their comments indicate an active feeling *for* poetry rather than additional knowledge *about* poetry.¹

Choral speaking is not a concert recitation of "memory gems," nor is it the old time sing-song which used the same "ministerial melody" for tragic, humorous, narrative, or dialogue. Rather, choral speaking is a form of art which brings poetry back to the life of the group. That is where it began. That is where our folk poetry came from. Also, it revives the lost gentle art of oral reading and reciting of beautiful verse, which has been overshadowed by too great an emphasis on the silent study of poetry.

More specifically, however, just what are the values to be derived from choral reading? In my opinion, the very first is a greater appreciation of poetry. Choral reading develops a sheer love of poetry for its own sake; it brings poetry to life. The student realizes that poetry was meant to be spoken, not to be read silently. It is an artistic experience which enriches the individual by extending his imagination and sympathy, and thereby broadening his own horizons.

Members of a chorus reading together gain habits of speaking accurately and distinctly, and in this capacity, choral speaking is extremely beneficial to the individual who stutters. However, the teacher must point out the gains made in choral speech, and help the student transfer them to his individual speech.

Choral reading is valuable in helping the shy or bashful student gain self-confidence. It gives him poise in appearing before an audience, and in losing himself in the group he is released to greater self-expression. Shared emotions through group interpretation enrich the individual.

¹ Grace E. Crofton, "Verse Speaking and Poetry Appreciation," *English Journal*, v. 30 (November, 1941), p. 733.

The leader or director of any verse choir is the most important person in it, for whatever values are to be gained depend upon her. I do not believe that every English teacher can be a verse-choir director, for there are certain qualifications that a leader must possess. First of all, she must be a lover of poetry, and must be able to read it well. She must be enthusiastic about verse speaking. She should have a rich background and understanding of both English and American poetry, and be familiar with the history of poetry. She must be able to stimulate the group into analytical study of the poems *without* tearing the poems to pieces. She must lead the group surely into the technique of expression, and be sensitive to sound effects, coloring, sound-sense values, melody, and rhythm. In addition it is desirable that she know music, for the musically trained ear can easily detect pitch levels of voices, and is able to feel and communicate the beat of rhythms quickly. The director should do more "guiding" than "drilling," and be eager to incorporate suggestions which come from her students. Although verse speaking has been emphasized as a fairly simple means of teaching poetry appreciation, the conductor should not plunge into it without adequate preparation. I have been a member of several verse choirs, yet when I decided to direct one in the classroom, I was momentarily at a loss until I referred to several books on the techniques of directing. It is not enough that a director has participated in a choir; as a conductor, she must approach choral work from an entirely different angle.

The actual size of the chorus may vary, although less than eight seems to destroy that very essential quality of "blended" voices. Twenty seems to be the ideal number, and an ordinary class should be approximately that size. The voices may be divided into girls' high, medium, and low, and boys' high, medium, and low. The verse speaking choir should proceed slowly at first, progressing from the absurdly simple to that which is more difficult. The choir might begin with some lullabies or marching chants, but it is important that these first studies have melodic quality and a strong human interest. I would suggest as one possibility not to be overlooked, the familiar "Johnny at the Fair," which provides a preliminary study in increase of voices and in two-part work of a very simple nature. The refrain is especially fun —

"Oh, dear, what can the matter be!
Dear, dear, what can the matter be!
Oh, dear, what can the matter be!
Johnny's so long at the fair!"

Marjorie Gullan, who probably has done more toward promoting verse speaking than any other one individual, says that there are four general divisions to be followed in interpreting given pieces of work — all choral poetry falls within the definitions of (a) refrain work, (b) antiphonal work, (c) group work, and (d) unison work.

An example of refrain work is found in the perfectly delightful old English ballad, "There Was a Frog," which begins —

"There was a frog lived in a well,
Whipsee diddle-dee dandy dee;
There was a frog lived in a well,
And a merrie mouse in a mill,
With a harum, scarum, diddle dum darum,
Whipsee diddle-dee dandy dee."

This is especially appealing to the inexperienced choir, for it is comparatively simple to perform, and may be done without too much practice. The choir may be divided into two groups, with one group taking the lines of the first stanza, the second group the second stanza, etc., and the whole choir joining in on each refrain.

Antiphonal work is even more effective, and usually more difficult to execute. "Old Love" by Katherine Lee Bates is one of the simpler examples, in which voices of a light texture are used for the description of "young love" and the warmer, darker voices for "old love." The first stanza is as follows:

"Young love is passion;
Old love is peace;
Such is love's fashion
Never to cease.
Young love's a carol;
Old love's a psalm;
Child love is wild love;
Old love is calm."

To me, the most moving example of antiphonal work and the most impressive is "Thirteen Sisters" from Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body*. There is a crescendo of warning and terror in the refrain which begins ominously, "Have a care, my son" and climaxes with "The sky is falling, my son," in contrast to the decrescendo of confidence in the exposition. However, such work should not be attempted until the choir has become fairly experienced and proficient.

Almost any selection may be easily adapted to group work. In making the arrangement, there should be a socialized discussion, during which the class decides what parts of the poem are to be read as solo or chorus, and what parts are to be spoken by the various voice sections.

A poem particularly suited for unison work is "Grass" by Carl Sandburg. The choir speaks with sombre impersonality; it is the voice of destiny working steadily and quietly, not in a sudden, dramatic fashion.

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work —
I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun
Shovel them under and let me work.

Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:

What place is this?

(These two lines are quiet, personal, in comparison to the impersonal note of the rest.)

Where are we now?

I am the grass.
Let me work.

The selection of poems for the verse speaking choir is naturally most important. What, you may ask, is inherent in a poem that we may recognize it as suitable material for choral reading? First of all, the poem should contain a feeling of universality of experience, an element of plurality, rather than singularity. "I" poems should be avoided, or used sparingly. The poem should possess a strong and compelling rhythm, vivid and striking diction and variation, and contrast in mood or thought or both. Poems definitely too intimate and *not* for the choir are Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Sonnets From the Portuguese" and Milton's "Ode on His Blindness." The choir should be given a variety of selections, some serious, some lilting, and some humorous. Of the latter type we have "The Pirate Don Durke of Dowdee" by Mildred Plew Meigs, "Jim" by Hillaire Belloc, and "The Plaint of the Camel" by Charles Edward Carryl.

Although at first thought, sonnets might seem too personal for group rendition, some of them can be hauntingly beautiful when given a delicate treatment. In her "God's World," Edna St. Vincent Millay expresses an ecstasy which is almost too beautiful to bear, but yet the experience is common to all of us. This

poem gives an opportunity for delicate shading and emotional expression. There is a grandness in the lines

"Lord, I do fear

Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year;"

which contrasts with the hushed plea in the last lines

"My soul is all but out of me, —

Let fall no burning leaf;

Prithee, let no bird call."

Many selections combine bodily and vocal expression as does Vachel Lindsay's "Congo." This may be begun as the group stands with arms interlocked, and then starts swaying with a decided rhythm, left and right, saying,

"Fat black bucks in a wine barrel room

Barrel-house kings with feet unstable

Sagged and reeled and pounded on the table,

Pounded on the table."

The entire poem may be most effective and moving when presented in this manner.

A director with ingenuity and enthusiasm finds a limitless source of material at her disposal, and she can effect arrangements which are clever and impressive of such poems as "Cargoes" and "Sea Fever" by Masefield, "When I Was One and Twenty" and "Loveliest of Trees" by Housman, "Caliban in the Coal Mines" by Untermeyer, and early English and Scottish ballads.

I believe that no other author adapts himself quite so beautifully to the speech choir as does Alfred Noyes. The one selection of his, best loved by high school students everywhere, is "The Highwayman," which, when interpreted by the verse choir, can thrill any audience. His "Forty Singing Seamen" is another which lends itself especially well, and which I would recommend as being most effective when done by a boys' choir. The gaiety and lilting rhythm of "The Barrel Organ" make it appealing to both boys and girls. The choir will enjoy the invitation

"Go down to Kew in lilac time, in lilac time, in lilac time,

Go down to Kew in lilac time, (it isn't far from London!)

And you shall wander hand in hand with love in

summer's wonderland;

Go down to Kew in lilac time (it isn't far from London!)

One of my favorite poems of Alfred Noyes's is his "Song of Sherwood," and although I have never seen an arrangement of it, or heard one given, I feel it has beautiful possibilities. The

following is my own arrangement, which I someday hope to hear read by a verse speaking choir.

A SONG OF SHERWOOD

ALFRED NOYES

GIRLS (LOW)

Hushed
Now mysterious

Sherwood in the twilight, is Robin Hood awake?
Grey and ghostly shadows are gliding through the
brake;

ADD GIRLS (MEDIUM)

Still hushed

Shadows of the dappled deer, dreaming of the
morn,
Dreaming of a shadowy man that winds a shadowy
horn.

ALL

Louder: excitement
Softer: color words

Robin Hood is here again; all his merry thieves
Hear a ghostly bugle note shivering through the
leaves,

BOYS (HIGH)

Growing more faint

Calling as he used to call, faint and far away,
In Sherwood, in Sherwood, about the break of day.

GIRLS

Gay!

Merry, merry England has kissed the lips of June:

GIRLS (HIGH)

All the wings of fairyland were here beneath the
moon;

GIRLS (LOW)

Like a flight of rose leaves fluttering in a mist
Of opal and ruby and pearl and amethyst.

BOYS

Exultation

Merry, merry England is waking as of old,
With eyes of blither hazel and hair of brighter
gold;
For Robin Hood is here again beneath the bursting
spray

ALL

In Sherwood, in Sherwood, about the break of day.

GIRLS

Lightly

Love is in the greenwood building him a house
Of wild rose and hawthorn and honeysuckle
boughs;

ALL

Love is in the greenwood: dawn is in the skies:

ALL

More subdued

Where the deer are gliding, down the shadowy
glen,
All across the glades of fern he calls his merry
men :

Swifter

Doublets of the Lincoln green glancing through the
May
In Sherwood, in Sherwood, about the break of day.

BOYS (LOW AND MEDIUM)

Calls them and they answer; from aisles of oak
and ash
Rings the

SOLO — BOYS (HIGH)

Follow! Follow!

ALL BOYS

And boughs begin to crash ;

GIRLS (HIGH)

Excitedly

The ferns begin to flutter

GIRLS

and the flowers begin to fly;

ALL

Climax!

And through the crimson dawning the robber
band goes by.

GIRLS (Low)

Robin !

ADD BOYS (MEDIUM)

Robin !

ALL

Robin! All his merry thieves
Answer as the bugle-note shivers through the
leaves:

GIRLS AND BOYS (Low)

Grows fainter

Calling as he used to call, faint and far away,

GIRLS (Low)

Very faint

In Sherwood, in Sherwood, about the break of day.

I realize that there is much left to be said about the verse speaking choir in regard to formal presentation of selections, beneficial voice exercises and pitfalls which the inexperienced choir may encounter; however, if the English teacher who aspires to be a director familiarizes herself with certain basic techniques, and lets her imagination run rampant, she'll have a minimum of griefs and a fascinating experience with her verse speaking choir!

Correcting Themes

By ELEANOR MIHAN

Waukegan Township High School

For several years I have been hearing high school pupils complain of the discouragement they feel upon looking at their themes covered with red pencil marks. They say they know that their mistakes in spelling and punctuation should be corrected, but they think that composition teachers usually overemphasize mistakes in mechanics and forget subject matter altogether. Therefore, in order to encourage my pupils to think and plan carefully and to write cleverly and interestingly as well, I have adopted the following plan:

At the beginning of a semester I ask each of my pupils to write in class a short paragraph or two on a given topic. I then check the paragraphs, making a list of frequent errors in spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, paragraphing, transitions, and content. The next day, I discuss these errors with the whole class.

The second theme is a formal one, written outside the classroom and checked for mechanics only. After I have indicated the mistakes on the papers, the pupils correct their own themes.

I have each pupil read his third theme to the class. As he reads, I grade his work only for content, sentence structure, and transitions. After the child has finished his reading, I offer him a bit of praise or encouragement before giving him advice and a grade.

The fourth theme bears two grades: a letter for content and a number for mechanics.

I repeat this process on the next four themes and assign an extra paper on which I omit red pencil marks and grades, but give a comment on the theme in general.

Most of my pupils like this method in composition because they know that to me their ideas are just as important as commas and periods.

The Merchant of Venice for "Slows"

By ELSIE KATTERJOHN

Waukegan Township High School

Experience had indicated that presenting Shakespeare to "slows" was a painful process, the teacher doing all the work, the pupils seeming to comprehend little and to appreciate less. However, the following experimental approach, employed with a particularly "difficult" group, was sufficiently encouraging that I plan to use it again.

The 1A (very!) slows were to attempt *The Merchant of Venice*. One of my good students from the third-year English work agreed to write an adaptation of Lamb's version of the play, from *Tales from Shakespeare*. She interspersed brief explanations of difficult words and made shifts to more modern terminology. Her version of the play was mimeographed.

The class read the story in that form and discussed it thoroughly. Then I asked each child to select an incident from the story and to write it in play form. The playwright then selected the actors to read the lines in his short sketch. These attempts at drama were somewhat ludicrous, but the children apparently did not realize the fact.

What they did realize, however, was the difficulty of writing any kind of play. From that point, we were ready to see how Shakespeare had managed to do it.

First, though, we had to know who Shakespeare was and when he lived. Discovering that he belonged to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we decided that he probably wouldn't use quite the English we speak today, since language is constantly changing. In this connection, we studied such words as *still* meaning *always*, *presently* meaning *immediately*, etc.

Then we were ready for the reading of the Shakespearean version, which, from this point, we treated in the customary fashion, but with previous acquaintance with the story.

On the whole, comprehension of the play was good, and considerable appreciation was evident.

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